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Letter to the Editors

I wish I could be as optimistic as Jonah Raskin on the question of the uses of the Pentagon Papers as a mass instructional tool. Despite all appearances, I fear that the documents, in their manner of excerptation and interpretation, may have the effect of actually reinforcing public respect for the system responsible for the war. Here are a few brief comments:

1. The Pentagon Papers Do Not Offer an Explanation for American Aggression in Vietnam. They may contain the ingredients for an honest history but their authors do not really probe into the concrete interests of America's mad bombers or the nature of the Pax Americana the Indochina intervention was intended to advance. The Study is overloaded with facts but weak on their interpretation. It presents the spectacle of tactical disagreements between policy advisors, but little direct evidence about the framework of their analysis. The Bundys and the Rostows remain technocrats even in their criminality. By limiting their stories on the documents to the so-called "decision-making process" the New York Times and the rest of the bourgeois press, which have now abandoned the story, narrowed the scope of any real inquiry. Their intent was never to demystify the American system. "We threw out literally hundreds of documents -- some which would have put your hair on end -- because they didn't show how the decisions were made," the Times' foreign editor has admitted. This approach led a Times editor to conclude the paper's series by pronouncing the Vietnam war a "Greek Tragedy." We learn more about the war to find we have understood very little.

2. The Pentagon Papers Have Been Used as an Advertisement for the American System. Overseas, the publication of the Study has been taken as evidence of the basic resilience of the American system. The press has patted itself on the back for its courage while its pundits speak glibly of the Supreme Court's anti-government decision as an indication that 1984 is not here yet, by

golly. For the most part, the Study portrays the inner councils of government as arenas which encouraged debate. Here is American pluralism at work: The CIA is to be congratulated for the accuracy of its estimates, while the Generals are condemned for their gung-ho bombs-away attitudes. When one is drawn into this type of analytical game, one is expected to support one side or the other rather than call for the overthrow of the game itself.

3. The Pentagon Papers Don't Necessarily Bring These War Crimes Trials Closer. By portraying the war as a progression of errors, the Study may very well soften the culpability of individual decisionmakers and their collective effort. "The published record," notes former U.S. Ambassador to Saigon, Frederick Nolting, "tends to varnish over these crucial events to make them less offensive or damaging to those involved." As the newspaper columnists warn against "McCarthyism of the Left," the mass media actually adopts the position warned against by Daniel Ellsberg. They view the war as "a tragedy without villains, war crimes without criminals, lies without liars, a process of immaculate deception."

I am sure Brother Raskin shares all of these briefly-enumerated fears. If someone's looking for an account of the war which shows how documents can be used to write honest history, consult "The Secret History of Kennedy's Private War" by Ralph Stavins which appeared in the New York Review of Books in late July. All of this is to say that it remains for radical scholars and the left itself to reinterpret and popularize the meaning of the Pentagon Papers. Jonah Raskin has made one stab. We need more.

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